



User-Centred Design and the Ethical Agenda

An interview with Paul Nini by Andy Polaine

Paul Nini is Professor and Coordinator of the Visual Communication Design Undergraduate Program at The Ohio State University and has written several articles and papers on the role of ethics in graphic design and moving towards the idea of "user-centred" rather than client-centred design. His article "In Search of Ethics in Graphic Design" in the AIGA journal, Voice, started much debate, some of which we hope to continue in the OCN. Here we try to tackle some hard questions about the role of the designer and where responsibility and action start and can make a difference.

AP: I thought you raised a very important point when talking about the lack of references to the responsibility to the audience/user in the AIGA code of ethics, especially in the current trend of "experience design". One might argue that the ever-presiding "market forces" would take care of this part. For example, if audiences/users don't like it/feel offended/feel neglected that they can just buy or use something else, so why do we need to nanny them as designers and have an ethical stance towards them? Perhaps, in short, why are we designers at all responsible here?

PN: It's true that the market does naturally reward products and services that meet user or customer needs and punish those that don't -- but that fact doesn't, in my opinion, absolve designers from their responsibilities to the public. In fact, I would argue that the role of the designer ought to be that of a "mediator" between client organizations and the public. We can be the "bridge," if you will, that connects these groups. Client organizations often benefit from someone who can show them what they look like through their customers' eyes, and designers are in an excellent position to provide that service. We must, however, interact with audiences and users to provide such insights, and unfortunately, not that many designers are currently doing that. Most of us are taught under an educational model that is based in the fine arts, and that stresses self-expression. The problem I have with that notion is that it puts the emphasis on our own wants and needs, and not on those who experience our work. It seems to me that if we direct our efforts toward serving the public, then there will be, we hope, more effective products and services from which to choose, and consequently less wasted time, energy, material, etc.

So, to wrap up this point, I would assert that we designers have the potential to direct things in a significantly more positive and ethical manner - but we first have to acknowledge that no one else is really in the position to do this as well as we can. As I stated in the AIGA article, our greatest contribution to society may be simply making things easy to use for those who experience them, and we ought not to lose sight of that guiding principle.

AP: One question that keeps cropping up is this: If we say no to certain potential clients for ethical reasons, these same people will go somewhere else and spend their money. They might think for a moment, but quite probably not. How does this not become a futile exercise? Surely it's better for an "ethical" designer to take on the McDonald's design job and try and shape the campaign than for someone who doesn't care at all?

PN: I agree, a designer who's taken on the kinds of responsibilities to the public that I've just described would undoubtedly have better results with a client like McDonald's - as opposed to one

who's just willing to take the money and run. However, McDonald's would have to be willing to listen to the public and do things differently in response to that feedback. If not, then you would indeed have an exercise in futility. Designers can lead the horse to water, but they can't make it drink, to use an old analogy. Still, it's better to try, I think, than just perpetuate business as usual.

AP: So, let's assume that anyone who is an AIGA member as chosen to follow the code of ethics. What about all those that aren't members? In our profession there are no professional qualifications required (by law) before you can call yourself a designer. How do we combat that?

PN: There really is no way to combat the situation that you describe, other than with education. The membership of the AIGA represents only a small percentage of those practicing graphic design in the US with what most of us would consider to be "proper" qualifications. There are also a huge number of paraprofessional designers out there that have very little in the way of qualifications, but who also create much of the work that the public experiences. A number of those folks can't even set type properly, so expecting them to adopt ethical standards is fairly unrealistic. On the bright side, everyone does have the ability to learn and grow, and that's why having good design education programs, helpful design literature, and a forum such as this is so critical.

AP: One of the essays I found most engaging in Citizen Designer was Chris Riley's In Defense of Advertising. I found it interesting because he advocated a different approach. Instead of trying to prevent consumerism, which, he argues, is a lost cause because human nature is a consuming one, he suggests we need to think of sustainable consumerism. That is, to increasingly factor in the environmental and ethical issues into any campaign, brand and product. This, he argues (and quite rightly in my opinion), is already happening at the consumer level. Many of us are already more informed and smarter than old-school ad campaigns would have us believed. Many of us feel that companies have become disconnected from the people that maintain their business (i.e., consumers/customers) and focused solely on making money (nothing wrong with making money, but you have to remember why and how). He touches upon the networked culture many of us are in - cultures of influence and knowledge at the peer-group level rather than a controlled top-down manner. So coming back to ethics, in what way do we engage in this? Is it only something for the advertising guys and the corporations or do we have a role to play?

PN: I also very much agree with Chris Riley's points. Many companies currently rely on market research, which really only tells them how to best sell what products they're already making, or what services they're already providing. But design research, as I mentioned in my response to the first question, has the potential to uncover user and audience wants and needs to guide the development of new, better, and more effective products and services. We're already seeing smarter companies (such as Apple) using this approach effectively -- but things should go much further in my opinion, especially concerning issues that directly affect the environment. For instance, what will happen to my Apple computer once it's outlived its usefulness? At the moment my only choice is to have it end up in a landfill, which is disgraceful to my mind. Companies must realize that we want to be able to return old products for reclamation and reuse. Chris is correct in stating that less-hierarchical communication would make that type of feedback to a company much more immediate and valuable, and I do hope we are moving in that direction. Finally, designers definitely have a major role to play in this setting, as we can help provide a bridge to the public that will allow their wants and needs to be acted upon. The results should be better for all of us -- more satisfied consumers, more profitable clients, and more ethical designers.

AP: So one pathway for change is in the educational setting. It seems true that most large-scale change takes time, generations, in fact, for real change to happen - although there is often a tipping point (thanks Malcolm Gladwell). Yet we have also seen massive change (thanks Bruce Mau) happen in very short amounts of time largely through the interconnectedness of the Internet. It's hard to know, for example, whether Apple truly reacted to the "iPod's dirty little secret" campaign about its short

battery life (and there must be a lot of old iPods in, or waiting for, landfills - complete with dead batteries) or whether they were already on the case. Designers (and artists) seem well placed to create engaging, even entertaining (perhaps essentially so given the general wit factor of viral campaigns) that can put pressure on corporations to change their thinking. It may often be the case that corporations don't even see the problem until it's put under their noses because marketing departments are so often convinced of the merits of their own products. Do you see any possibilities to accelerate this change in attitudes via the web and the kinds of collective collaborations and campaigns it can so rapidly spread?

PN: I think we're actually talking about change happening with two groups, designers and client organizations. As far as designers go, I think we are seeing some positive changes concerning what we feel our roles should be. I believe that the concept of "web usability" has introduced more graphic designers to the idea that feedback from users and audiences is generally a good idea -- though I'm fairly sure that some industrial designers have been aware of this for quite a while. I'm also finding that graphic design students are a lot more receptive to this aspect of the design process than they were when I first started teaching almost 20 years ago. I have high hopes for the next generation of designers, as they seem a lot more directed toward using design for the public good than my generation has been. I also think you can look at a profession's development similarly to that of an individual's. Design is still a pretty young field, and I believe that we're finally starting to get out of our self-absorbed, "teenage" phase (self-expression) and we're now moving into a more other-directed, "adult" phase (user-centered design). Or at least I hope we are.

Simultaneously, some client organizations seem to be seeing the value of using design research as a way to gather consumer input, and as you've pointed out, the Internet has just made that process much faster and easier. The web seems to have enormous possibilities for collaboration, and a future challenge may be to find out how we designers can use it to help make our work more useful and effective. Any technology that can provide more direct and immediate feedback to designers and their clients has got to be beneficial. We now have to figure out how to use the web along with the many other methods of conducting design research.

AP: This is slightly related to my last point - J. D. Biersdorfer suggests, as you do, that although designers are pretty much the lowest in the food chain of marketing/branding/strategy they are in a powerful position because they are the last link in the chain and their work is the first point of contact for consumers. An educational approach as well as an empowering one might emphasise this point, although tempered by the client/audience ethical intersection and responsibilities you described (as opposed to simple self-expression). It seems to me that we need more good case studies to demonstrate the value here, both to students and clients. Are there any that come to mind for you?

PN: Designers are often pushed to the margins by other professionals, and that seems to happen more often with in-house, corporate design groups, as opposed to outside consultants. I do very much agree that we need good case studies to demonstrate how designers can play a more central and strategic role in interacting with consumers. I think the UK's Design Council (<http://www.design-council.org.uk/>) has been doing a fairly good job of defining for client organizations what roles designers can take, and showing examples of how design can be used for strategic benefit. Here in the US, the AIGA and the IDSA have also been developing such information, but possibly not as deeply as may be required. The US group NextDesign (<http://www.nextd.org/>) also seems to be doing some interesting work in this area. I think there are also a number of design consultants who are providing services to clients at a strategic level, but that are just not sharing that information, due to confidentiality issues. Finally, I've written about how to incorporate user and audience research in the communication design process, and I'd point readers to my blog (<http://paulnini.eponym.com/blog>), where they can download a PDF that includes that article, along with some others that I've written over the last 15 years.

AP: With regards to the code of ethics - the case studies would help again here - the issue always seems to be, the creative industries, one of the perception of value. It's the old new graduate question of "how much should I charge?" I wrote a roundup of a conference in which I talked about this. The statistics of our profession speak loudly. In the USA and Europe more people visit galleries and museums than attend football matches (the World Cup notwithstanding).

Anne Bamford compiled a report for the United Nations on art and design education around the world, and pointed out that design is a huge multiplier of economic investment. For every dollar spent by companies on design (branding for an insurance company, for example) there is a 28-fold multiplication of that investment. In other words, that insurance company earns back 28 times its investment through the power of design. Bamford went on to explain that no other industry in the world has that kind of multiplying effect. Yet those working in sectors commonly thought of as wealth generating such as banking, management and law all consume enormous amounts of the cultural product design and the arts create. Most people read books, magazines or newspapers on their way to work. Perhaps they listen to music on their (beautifully designed) iPods and then come home to watch television or go to see a film. Creative capital is everywhere and because of this ubiquity its value becomes almost invisible.

How can we make it more visible and raise the understanding that there is a quantitative and not just qualitative difference between well-executed, professional design and someone with a Microsoft Office template? Is it possible that 'ethical' designers (or any profession for that matter) might be able to claim a badge of some kind, similar to organic products, based on some kind of monitoring of behaviour? Is this a ridiculous idea? Would brands be willing to (perhaps though not necessarily) pay more, or at least the correct amount to use designers accredited in such a fashion? Would it possible that corporations might be proud (or at least think it good marketing) to use designers like this?

PN: I agree that design is everywhere and that it does have a huge impact on our lives today. Ironically, the design profession is under-recognized and under-utilized -- hence the large percentage of badly designed products and communications out there that don't significantly address user or audience needs. A kind of endorsement as you describe that indicates that a client organization has used designers to create a "better" or "more effective" product might work. However, I think that consumers tend to distrust such things, as they haven't been very meaningful in the past (at least here in the US). Besides, I think it's probably more important that we help clients address issues of reclamation, reuse, recycling, etc. -- as there are more immediate needs in that area.

I do think that our professional societies might endorse designers that practice in more ethical and strategic manners, though I imagine any such effort would be a political minefield. I can tell you that even though my AIGA article proposing additions to the code of ethics concerning our responsibilities to the public has generated some discussion, no such changes to the code have been made. I haven't actually pressed the AIGA on the issue, but I'm guessing that it's not yet an issue that most of the member care enough about to deal with at this point. I'm hopeful that will change over time, especially if there is even more discussion on the topic.

AP: Thank you.

Paul will be hosting a Message Board thread in the OCN to accompany this interview. Please take a moment to comment, debate, agree, argue!

*"In Search of Ethics in Graphic Design" can be found here:
<http://voice.aiga.org/content.cfm?ContentAlias=_getfullarticle&aid=611418>.*